

Aviator receives rare medal

By ELIZABETH PEZZULLO

Freelance Star

Charles Lindbergh was awarded one. So were the Wright Brothers and Amelia Earhart.

Yesterday, Marine Lt. Col. Michael V. Franzak's name was added to that notable list of recipients of the Distinguished Flying Cross.

The bronze cross with a superimposed four-bladed propeller, with a combat V for action, was bestowed upon the 43-year-old Stafford County resident during a brief ceremony at Quantico Marine Corps Base's Warfighting Laboratory.

Brig. Gen. Randolph Alles, commanding general of the lab, did the honors as Franzak's wife, parents and a few dozen Marine comrades looked on.

This particular medal isn't handed out frivolously. One who receives it must "distinguish himself by heroism or extraordinary achievement while participating in an aerial flight," according to the Distinguished Flying Cross Society.

Franzak, who joined the Navy in 1981 and was commissioned in the Marines in 1987, earned his award rescuing a pinned-down Army Reserve unit in Afghanistan.

On an August day in 2003, he and his wingman, Capt. Mike Trapp, were ready to screech into the morning sky in their AV-8B Harrier jets. But before they could take off in their "Flying Nightmares," the two got word that the unit out of New York had come under heavy attack from the Taliban in the central mountain region of Afghanistan.

Franzak and Trapp were urgently needed to provide air cover for the reservists.

"They were in the middle of a [expletive] sandwich," Franzak said, recounting the adventure.

He and Trapp, flying separate jets, were trying desperately to pinpoint the soldiers' location. Their radio contact on the ground had been separated from the rest of his unit and was without a map or a Global Positioning System.

"He was telling us to look for ridge lines," Franzak said.

In the background, Franzak could hear machine-gun fire and rocket-propelled grenades being launched.

"It became evident that it was a rapidly degrading situation," Franzak said.

He needed to act fast.

After firing off a string of flares to distract the enemy, Franzak got a better read on the enemy's location. Dipping his jet low into a valley while Trapp provided overhead cover, Franzak unloaded the two 25 mm Gatling guns strapped to the underbelly of the jet--spitting out 50 rounds per second.

"Good hits," came the radio report from the ground, Franzak recalled.

But the mission wasn't over.

Franzak then unleashed two laser-guided bombs hitched to the wings of his plane.

The reserve unit was able to regroup, but Franzak and Trapp spent 4 1/2 grueling hours fighting the enemy, occasionally refueling in midair.

Their actions saved the soldiers. Soon after the fighting, remnants of a Taliban campsite was discovered at the spot Franzak and Trapp had attacked.

Franzak credits his radio contact on the ground for being able to direct the Harriers to the enemy site with no navigational tools at his disposal.

"He performed admirably," Franzak said.

About a week after the fight, Franzak got to meet the men he saved.

"It was awesome," said Franzak, who has a picture of himself, Trapp and some reservists standing outside their makeshift barracks looking far more at ease than during their first encounter.

"They were really grateful," Franzak said. "And we were honored to serve them."